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SUBJECT: PRE-ELECTIONS MEETINGS IN TURKMENABAT: THE SAME, YET
DIFFERENT

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) On January 23, Charge d'Affaires a.i. Jennifer Brush, ConOff, and PolEcon LES visited Turkmenabat, the capital of Lebap Welayat (Province), to observe activity in the lead-up to Turkmenistan's first multi-candidate presidential elections. During her courtesy call with local officials, the Charge raised continuing concerns about harassment of the Turkmenabat American Corner, and found a surprising ally in a local official whose daughter was a FLEX alumnus. Following that meeting, Central Election Committee Chairman Myrat Garryev escorted Emboffs to formal campaign appearances by presidential candidates Orazmyrat Garajayev and Ashyrniyaz Pomanov, ending the day with a tour of a local voting precinct. End Summary.

ELECTIONS, EDUCATION AND PRIVATIZATION

2. (SBU) Deputy Hakim of Lebap Welayat Annamurad Saparmuhammedov introduced his colleagues, including Myrat Garryev, Central Election Committee Chairman; Yusup Jumayev, Deputy Chairman of the Lebap Election Committee; Akmurat Jomartov, Chief of Administration, Lebap Welayat Hakimlik; Batyr Abdiyev, Administration Department, Lebap Welayat Hakimlik; Ejegul Bayriyeva, Deputy Hakim (Mayor) of Turkmenabat city and Chief of Lebap Women's Union; and Shirin Jumakuliyeva, Trade Union Chief for Lebap Welayat.

3. (SBU) When discussing the elections, local officials were cautious in characterizing presidential candidates' platforms as deviating from Niyazov's policies. Garryev was more confident in speaking about needed changes, perhaps signaling that he feels comfortable about his role within the post-Niyazov power structure. When Saparmuhammedov began to defend the nine-year education system using the old party lines, Garryev impatiently cut him off and reminded him that the Interim President and all the other candidates agreed that expanding education to a ten-year curriculum was necessary. The Lebap officials were confused when the Charge mentioned one candidate's statement opposing the privatization of communal agricultural land; they agreed that privatizing home and garden plots could be possible, but felt that title to large-scale agricultural plots must remain communally held, albeit with long-term leaseholders having stronger rights to the land.

THE AMERICAN CORNER AND FLEX TESTING PROBLEMS

4. (SBU) The Charge noted post's continuing concerns about regarding harassment of the Turkmenabat American Corner, including the closure of a proposed children's Halloween party, an issue that ConOff had addressed with Jomartov and Abdiyev in November. Charge remarked that the Halloween party incident had received high-level

attention in Washington, and that welayat officials should not want this type of petty harassment to be seen as characteristic of Lebap.

While harassment of the American Corner had appeared to level off somewhat in the last few months, hakimlik officials still did not appear to be willing and cooperative partners.

15. (SBU) Jomartov and his deputy, Abdiyev, expressed appreciation that the Embassy had addressed a concern that he had raised in November with Conoff that the director of the American Corner was submitting her activities reports in English. However, he remained defensive of his office's scrutiny of American Corner activities, insisting that the main obstacle to better cooperation was the "willful" and "provoking" personality of the American Corner director. Jomartov pointed to his office's lack of harassment of the IATP center and "cooperation" on FLEX testing in Lebap as proof that "she was the problem, not us." (COMMENT: For those who have met the director of the American Corner, it is difficult to imagine a less antagonistic person. Emboffs suspect that her ethnicity -- she is an ethnic Russian, unlike her ethnic Turkmen predecessor -- may play a role. END COMMENT.)

16. (SBU) The Charge expressed the Embassy's full support for the American Corner director, noting that she had been carefully chosen for her position based on her qualifications, and that she was well aware of her obligation to operate within the boundaries of Turkmenistan law. As for Jomartov's argument that the hakim's office was cooperative in facilitating FLEX testing, the Charge protested that Lebap Welayat Educational Department official Masharipov had attempted to block otherwise qualified students from testing sites and only relented when Emboffs who observed his actions confronted him directly. Garryev, who appeared irritated with Jomartov's response, goaded Saparmuhammedov into promising that the hakim would look into the matter. (COMMENT: When the Charge raised her concerns, the look of incomprehension on Saparmuhammedov's face and surprised displeasure on Garryev's face

indicated that Jomartov had not briefed his superiors adequately. Garryev appeared deeply annoyed with Jomartov's defensive justifications of his officials' behavior. END COMMENT.)

17. (SBU) At the end of the meeting, Shirin Jumakuliyeva, the head of the Trade Unions, interrupted Jomartov's attempt to have the last word. "Do not let their actions make you think," she said, "that we do not appreciate what the United States has done for us." She praised the availability of English-language texts, Internet access, and cultural programs through the American Corner. She went on to mention her gratitude for her daughter's opportunity to study in the United States through the FLEX program, which led to her daughter's acceptance to the American University of Central Asia in Bishkek. Offering an opportunity to children to participate in the FLEX program, she said, was a dream for most Turkmenistan parents.

"ELECTION THEATER": HIGHLY-SCRIPTED DEMOCRACY AT WORK

18. (SBU) Following the morning meeting, Garryev accompanied the Charge, ConOff and PolEcon LES to a Turkmenabat auditorium for appearances by presidential candidates Orazmyrat Garajayev and Ashyrniyaz Pomanov. The appearances were stultifying in their scripting, from the affected Soviet-style rhetoric of supporters' introductions to candidates' stiff discomfort as they read tonelessly from written speeches to the blandness of the "spontaneous" audience questions for the candidates.

19. (SBU) In addition to reiterating his general platform, Orazmyrat Garajayev, the candidate from Abadan City in Ahal Province, made a few remarks that were tailored to the Turkmenabat audience. First, he promised to build a cement factory in Lebap, presumably to address unemployment, though he did not go so far as to say so. He vowed to develop "natural resources" in Magdanly, a Lebap town, and to "continue the beautification" of all towns and villages. Of more general interest, he promised to sell apartments newly built by the government at affordable prices and to further develop the transportation infrastructure between the welayats.

110. (SBU) Balkan Welayat candidate Ashyrniyaz Pomanov's speech was distinguished by his strong personal interest in rebuilding sports and recreation facilities and programs; he vowed to build a new

public sports complex in each Welayat. Noting the \$1.5 billion of technology invested in the Turkmenbashy refinery, Pomanov promised that similar advanced technology would be invested in the Seydi refinery, located in Lebap Welayat. Finally, he promised to develop a plan to allow privatization of homestead lots, and to provide long-term mortgage loans to young families.

¶11. (SBU) COMMENT: Despite the predictability in the format of the candidate events, there were several nuances that were a welcome change from a similar candidate event Conoff attended in Turkmenabat in November, prior to district-level elections. The local candidates' platforms, prior to Niyazov's death, consisted of praising "Saparmurat Turkmenbashy the Great" and the Ruhnama, along with taking uncontroversial stances "for beautification" and "against narcotics." The presidential candidates, while not deviating substantially from each other, addressed areas where the Government of Turkmenistan could actually improve, an idea that would not be novel in almost any other country.

BRUSH